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ABSTRACT

When categorized into one of two groups, subjects preferred information indicating ingroup similarity and outgroup dissimilarity. When categorized into a single group, subjects preferred maximum information about others regardless of content. No preference occurred when subjects were not categorized into a group. Thus, preferred information maintained the initial group structure--accentuating differences between while minimizing differences within groups. (Author)

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A. Summary

Group Membership and Preference for Information about Others. DAVID A. WILDER, Rutgers University, & VERNON L. ALLEN, University of Wisconsin.

When categorized into one of two groups, subjects preferred information indicating ingroup similarity and outgroup dissimilarity. When categorized into a single group, subjects preferred maximum information about others regardless of content. No preference occurred when subjects were not categorized into a group. Thus, preferred information maintained the initial group structure--accentuating differences between while minimizing differences within groups.

B. Audio-Visual Aids

None

C. Authors and Institutions

David A. Wilder, Rutgers University, and Vernon L. Allen, University of Wisconsin

D. Area

Social Psychology (Small Groups)

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A. Title

Group Membership and Preference for Information About Others

B. Audio-Visual Aids

None

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D. Problem

Social psychologists have assumed that persons seek stability in their social relations (Heider, 1958). Therefore, persons should prefer information that supports existing group structures. An experiment was designed to examine this hypothesis. Subjects were categorized into either one of two groups, a single group, or not categorized at all. They were given the opportunity to view information about others prior to interacting with them. Research has indicated that persons assume greater attitudinal similarity with ingroup than with outgroup members (Wilder & Allen, 1974). If subjects act to maintain the existing group structure, then when categorized into two groups they should prefer information indicating ingroup similarity and outgroup dissimilarity, thereby maintaining the ingroup/outgroup distinction. When categorized into a single group, subjects should seek maximum information about fellow group members. Subjects not categorized into a group should have no preference for type of information about the others since there is no group structure to maintain.

E. Procedure

Participating in aggregates of eight, subjects privately rated a series of paintings (Billig & Tajfel, 1973) and completed an atti-

tude inventory. Then they were physically separated and assigned to one of three conditions:

(1) Two Groups. Subjects were allegedly assigned to one of two groups on the basis of their painting preferences.

(2) One Group. Subjects were told that all had preferred the same paintings so all were assigned to the same group.

(3) No Group. No mention was made of group assignment or painting preferences.

Subjects were individually informed that they would be interacting with the others in a discussion task and were assigned the code number 1. Before joining the others subjects ranked, from one through four, their preferences for seeing attitude items indicating their similarity or dissimilarity with persons 2-4 (ingroup in Two Groups condition) and persons 5-8 (outgroup in Two Groups condition).

F. Results

Data from each condition were analyzed with a Friedman two-way analysis of variance (Kirk, 1968). As hypothesized, analyses indicated that (a) subjects in the Two Groups condition preferred to view information indicating ingroup similarity ($\bar{X}$ = 1.9) and outgroup dissimilarity ($\bar{X}$ = 2.3), (b) subjects in the One Group condition preferred maximum information (both similar and dissimilar) about fellow ingroup members 2-5, and (c) subjects in the No Group condition expressed no preference (Table 1).

G. Conclusions and Implications

Results suggest that persons engage in selective information seeking when categorized into a group. When a member of one of two

groups they preferred information indicating intergroup differences and intragroup similarities. Thus, the manner in which a person initially structures a social situation, through categorization of himself and others into groups, affects the type of information he prefers. Investigators (e.g., Allport & Postman, 1947; Bruner, 1958) have reported that cognitive structures affect the information they process (e.g., effects of stereotypes on rumor transmission). Results of this study suggest, in addition, that cognitive structures (e.g., group categories) may affect the kind of information selected for processing.

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Table 1

Mean Rankings of Subjects' Information Preferences

Object of Information:		Persons 2-4		Persons 5-8	
Type of Information:		Similar	Dissimilar	Similar	Dissimilar
Conditions	N				
Two Groups	27	1.9_a	2.9_b	2.8_b	2.3_a
One Group	23	2.2_a	2.1_a	3.0_b	2.7_b
No Group	26	2.7_a	2.3_a	2.7_a	2.3_a

Note--The smaller the mean ranking, the more subjects preferred to see the information.

Post-hoc tests indicated that row means with different subscripts differed at the .05 level of significance (Kirk, 1968).